THE DENVER POST

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Six short essays on American art

Culture looks different from the West, the land of small cities, tall mountains, big skies and vast plains; where you can step back and truly see the changing scenery.

Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

STORY 1

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

1. The world could learn a lot of things from Colorado, and one of them is how to torture an artist.

For 23 years, people here have been tormenting the legendary Christo, brutally and systematically bullying him, in hopes of interrupting his plan to cover portions of the Arkansas River with billowy fabric.

They have been relentless and rude, insulting his hair and clothes, making fun of his accent at public meetings. They have forced him to invest more than $7 million on land-impact studies and lawyer fees to fight court challenges. They've called him a foreigner, which he's not, and criticized his art, reminding journalists and elected officials repeatedly that they are too unsophisticated to actually understand his work, which is a polite, Colorado way of saying they think it sucks.

They're still at it. This month, yet another lawsuit preventing the project, dubbed "Over the River," got underway in state appeals court. Environmentalists are suing the federal Bureau of Land Management for (finally) permitting the project back in 2011 and no one expects a quick resolution. In the meantime, Christo has been shell-

ing out about $87,000 a year in rent and funding a mitigation program for bighorn sheep that he promised as part of the BLM deal.

For his part, Christo has endured the bureaucratic equivalent of waterboarding with a good attitude. Great artists are not easily dismissed, and that is the thing Colorado has learned from him. He holds firm that, one day, his crews will drop hundreds of heavy anchors on the river's banks and span small sections of the water with his high-tech cloth, and rafters will float under it all with glee. Traffic will bottle up, the local economy will get $50 million in jobs and $121 million in tourism, the art crowd will celebrate and the Christo haters likely will protest.

Unless he dies first, which is one of those things that sometimes happens during torture. Christo is now 80 years old. "Over the River" would last just two weeks during August, but it will take three years to construct. And that can start only after approvals come through.

It is unclear, after all this time, who will prevail. Christo and his late wife, Jean-Claude, completed 22 projects over the past 50 years, including, famously, "The Gates" project in New York's Central Park, "The Umbrellas" in California and the "Wrapped Reichstag" in Berlin. Less famously, they failed to secure approval for 37 other pieces, rebuffed mostly by local governments. Permission denied. End of story.

But "Over the River's" never-ending story — the two-decade wait, all that torture — seems to reflect an anti-art bias that is particularly American, and more specifically Western American, rooted in an ideology where nature is boss and big-city artists are suspect. Culture is forced to defend itself in the newest part of the New World.

The extent of that is something everyone can learn by looking at Italy. Next summer, Christo will cover portions of Lake Iseo in the Lombardy region with a bright orange, fabric bridge, a project he is calling "The Floating Piers." Visitors will walk along a 2-mile path, hopping from the mainland to various islands. Traffic will snarl, and productivity will halt as the streets shut down.

But the whole project was approved in just 11 months. The Italians — who value artists' rights enough to put it in their constitution, don't hassle the creative class. Tourism dollars may be a part of that. So is a tradition going back to Michelangelo.

That's not the way of the West, and maybe that's fine. We've always made artists prove themselves, and they have, even if it meant spending years on a scaffold, carving presidents' faces into the side of a rocky South Dakota bluff. You go, Gutzon Borglum.

But not all artists have that kind of stamina, and we do pay a price when we crucify the most imaginative people in our midst. Italy will get its Christo. Colorado may not. And that would be Colorado's doing.

2. The best thing about living in the West is that people still argue about art.

It's not like New York, where public opinion on art settles in an instant. (This year's Bjork retrospective at MoMA: bad. Anything at the new Whitney: good.) Or Los Angeles, where everything is perfectly fine even if it's not (like the recently built Broad museum). Or a place such as Indianapolis, where nobody cares in the first place (Government subsidies to the art museum are $600,000 a year, compared with Denver's $9 million).

Libertarian-leaning Westerners make up their own minds, and avoiding consensus just for the heck of it is a social value. Art gives them a place to play out these contrarian tendencies because it's all opinion and no one can prove you wrong.

The best example is the giant, blue horse sculpture at Denver International Airport,

officially named Mustang although informally known as the evil Blucifer.

The piece looms like an enraged dragon over the facility's main road, and anyone who comes to or from the fifth-busiest airport in the country encounters its furious stare. It looks like it wants to trample you, destroy you.

Interestingly, this killer horse has actually killed. During construction in 2006, it fell over and crushed its maker, Luis Jimenez. This was bad PR for the horse.

Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

Still it's a monumental achievement by an important artist who got it just right. Jimenez is a crucial figure in the Chicano art movement who explored the mashing and clashing of European and Latino cultures in the late 20th century.

His mustang gets at the heart of this mixed marriage. This iconic vehicle of the cowboy West, the horse, is constructed in the high-gloss, material of Mexican low-rider car culture, fiberglass. The animal's machismo is fueled by generations of dudes trying to get somewhere in style. That's not anger running through its veins as much as testosterone. The piece is brilliant.

Those good and bad extremes have engendered a seven-year debate over its merits that shows no signs of letting up. Critics rail at dinner parties over the eerie impression it gives tourists and declare it a sham.

Defenders point out that it succeeds, at the very least, by not fading into the background like most public art and that even if you think it's atrocious, it gets people talking about art, something that should to be part of the dialogue all the time.

Lost in that sentiment is the idea that good art gets people talking about art, too, although interestingly, no one ever brings that up.

Good art implies an object we could all agree upon; consensus, and no one really wants that in a libertarian culture. People fire up the controversy around the horse, not to resolve it, but to keep it going. They enjoy the fight.

What's important about " Mustang" — and this gets clearer as the feud wrangles on — isn't what it says about social history or immigration or the battle for cultural superiority. It's in the beautiful way it reminds us how some people get along by not getting along, by arguing, and how a democratic culture can express its rights by never being wrong.

3. Opera is set up for the safe bet — for commodities as sure and sound as Mozart and Verdi — and suddenly that's wholly inconvenient.

Because, in just the past few years, the business has turned on its high-minded head and embraced the uncertain, shaking up the way business is done and leveling the playing field for midsize cities like Denver.

To be sure, America's opera companies continue to trade mostly on the warhorses, the singing butterflies and dying divas that sell tons of tickets at extravagant prices and cover the cost of expensive productions. But they're now expected to come up with fresh works, exclusive, home-grown commissions by living composers that still need to score enough cash to keep everyone paid.

You are nothing if you're not new in opera these days, and the pressure for premieres is extreme. Companies in St. Louis, Dallas and Santa Fe get all the respect

Todd Rosenberg Photography, provided by Lyric Opera.

— and all the cultural buzz and the hip, globe-trotting opera elite — because of their commitments to bring the art form into the 21st century. It's create or crumble if you want to be taken seriously.

And so we get new works in unlikely places, such as at the Cincinnati Opera, which presented its first world premiere in 50 years this summer with Ricky Ian Gordon's "Morning Star." Or Denver, which plans to present the first premiere ever in its 25-year history with this spring's "The Scarlet Letter," by Lori Laitman. Big companies don't want to be left out. This month, Lyric Opera of Chicago staged "Bel Canto," by Jimmy Lopez, its first main-stage premiere in more than in a decade.

The move toward new works is, at its core, an attempt to reverse that math that is pushing opera out of the country's cultural mainstream. Attendance has dropped by about one-third since 2002, according to the National Endowment for the Arts — and the folks who come are getting older.

Opera hopes to get out of this mess by appearing relevant and telling stories of our times. There are operas ripped from the headlines now, like "Dead Man Walking." The plot of Chicago's "Bel Canto" centered around terrorism and premiered just five days after the San Bernardino, Calif., shootings

There's a whole school of works about trendy, cultural icons. Among the recent debuts, Philadelphia's "Andy: A Popera," about Andy Warhol; St. Louis' "27," about Gertrude Stein; Santa Fe's "Oscar," about Oscar Wilde.

These operas sound exciting, but they can be hard to pull off. Opera audiences are conservative; that's their charm, really. They like old things done old ways. They are true believers in the beauty and traditions of the art form and the eternal appeal of Wagner and Handel, and they like to think that's all they need. You can't blame them for being risk-averse when tickets can go for $300 a popera.

General managers are on a mission, though, and that has its benefits. The new works have done much to bring a diversity of voices into the opera house. There are more women and minority composers being heard. The operas themselves tackle overdue topics, such as racism and bigotry and politics.

These moves may be risky, but its easy to see them as overdue and responsible, un-

safe but necessary.

4 ● **Sometimes I think of art as spent uranium; that there is simply too much of it in the world now.**

And we will have to come up with some clever way to dispose of it, like burying it in the Utah desert.

We can't simply incinerate it or throw it in the landfill; art is too precious for that. But we can't keep it all either.

Already, it is jamming the vaults of our best museums, who have so much art they can show only 5 percent of their holdings at any given time. It is overwhelming our streets, parks and airports. Every artist's studio and gallery basement is stuffed to popping with art that just sits there in piles and stacks, crammed on shelves and in drawers.

Cyrus McCrimmon, Denver Post file

Frankly, I'm tired of tripping over my own stuff. I'm out of wall space for paintings and floor space for sculpture. There's no room in my bookcases for all the ceramics and glass pieces I picked up at street fairs. The bulk of my collection sits in my garage, taking up way too much room. I can't throw it out — it's art, for goodness sake — and I paid way too much for it.

I don't blame artists for the glut, but rather patrons and collectors who, starting in the pre-Renaissance days began putting the work of artists in churches and palaces and calling it divine, elevating it into something to be revered and treasured — no one would throw out a statue of Jesus or the Virgin Mary or a rip down a mosaic depicting The Last Supper.

From there, art transformed into a status symbol of royalty, a part of their holdings, and thereby an emblem of national pride to be preserved forever. To paint over Michelangelo's famous ceiling in the Vatican would be to insult the whole Italian state as well as an entire world of Catholics.

It's just paint, really. And there was lots of paint in old Rome and whole academies of apprentice painters to dip their brushes into it. Still, the trend of thinking about art as something otherworldly began, leading up to this point where I have to park my Subaru on the street.

So now we have a world with millions and millions of art objects, all considered precious, and every day artists produce thousands and thousands more, a process that's only been speeded up by the digital revolution. Artists used to need a chisel or a darkroom to make their wares, now they just click on things and go to sleep while 3-D printers carve out even more treasured objects.

There's no way out really, although maybe artists could help. Perhaps they could talk more about their art and remove some of the mystery that surrounds it. Maybe they could remind us that half of their work was just something they conjured up when they were bored on the train, or made as an experiment that didn't pan out, or that they don't like much of it themselves. That art is a casual thing, really, sometimes from the soul and sometimes from the fact they don't have a date on Saturday night.

Then their dealers could stop pretending that every single thing they make is pre-

cious and therefore pricey. Then museums could acknowledge that many things in their collections are lesser objects and will never be shown and eliminate the clutter. Then we could all better separate the great art that should be saved forever from the art we should enjoy for a moment and let go.

And then, who knows, maybe the government could come up with some orderly and honorable way for us to get rid of the excess, like recycling it along with our junk mail and empty yogurt containers. Or perhaps cities could start buy-back programs like they have for guns.

And then maybe they could truck it all to Utah.

5. Classical music's decline in America is likely to make it better, more interesting and more American.

Sure, fewer people will hear it. That's already happening. Attendance at classical concerts is down 30 percent since the NEA started counting heads in 1982, and the drop remains steady.

The reasons can be summed up in two sentences. As a society we've become casual, multicultural and multimedia. Classical is, by and large, none of those things.

The sad irony in this is that music is better than it has been in 200 years, and anyone who spends time in a big-city concert hall knows how close to perfection most performances of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven have become. Musicians are just more skilled.

Denver Post file

Students start learning earlier and spend more time practicing because they can afford both. Technology and transportation allow them access to the best equipment and teachers in the world. Music schools have mastered ways to nurture versatile players who hit nearly every note while respecting their own musical personality.

The high quality of music school graduates is one of the reasons classical will survive. Full-time orchestra jobs will decline, but they'll find ways to play and pay the bills, performing with quartets and trios instead of large ensembles so concert proceeds are split among fewer musicians; recording their own music and selling it on the Internet; marketing themselves on social media; commissioning their own music; and funding concert tours through crowdsourcing websites.

It's an entrepreneurial, pull-yourself- up-by-the-bootstraps, be-your-own-boss, All-American way of making a living, a significant departure from the European model of working as a face-less, orchestra player who has no control over what and when things get played. Musicians have seized the opportunity to expand their repertoires to include new music, often from diverse young composers, that large, established operations often ignore.

These small, skilled ensembles are a boon to classical fans in smaller, non-coastal cities because they are essentially portable. It's easy to travel four string players to Montana or North Dakota, and the new business model demands it. That means the hinterlands are now exposed to the best musicians out there; classical has gone national, just like pop.

Daniel Petty, The Denver Post

If musicians want to play the big Brahms or Sibelius symphonies, they'll get a chance, although more and more that looks like volunteer work, done on the side with community orchestras, which are reporting huge increases in ticket sales in smaller cities as large, all-professional groups struggle.

Community concerts are cheaper, fewer and maybe not quite as good because only a few players get a salary. They're also noisier, rowdier and have fewer rules. They'll still seat you if you arrive late, maybe let you Tweet during the show. They're more casual, multicultural and multimedia. More American.

6. **As an architecture critic, I feel compelled to call out the holidays those times of year when we take our best buildings and doll them up like hookers on the Las Vegas Strip.**

This applies to Christmas in particular, but not exclusively. Every holiday has become an excuse to put too much makeup on city hall, to dress our historic homes in colors that don't quite go, to droop our public squares in an excess of sparkly-do.

One bough of holly might be a fine complement to a neo-classical facade, but that's never enough. Americans now spend $6 billion a year on Christmas decorations, and other holidays are catching up.

No bungalow looks good covered in artificial cobwebs of Halloween; no mansion remains dignified with pink Easter Bunnies hopping all over its lawn.

The holidays do their worst damage on traditional buildings. Even the most upstanding courthouse loses face if a hundred American flags hang from its cornice or a dozen carved pumpkins, all past their expiration date, creep up its elegant stair.

But the holidays have no mercy for modern thinkers either, those who believe less is more. Frank Lloyd's Wright's rules of restraint and proportion disappear when a singing snowman appears on one of his front porches.

Inside and out, the holidays assault our best design, targeting equally the new and the old. Some people may call this being being full of cheer. To an architecture aficionado, it can feel like organized crime.

There's no escape for architecture, no enjoyment when joy is in the air.

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A focus on fashion, with a dangerous eye

Marilyn Minter's "Pop Rocks." *Image provided by MCA Denver*

STORY 2

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

Marilyn Minter understands the things that pull us in, take us over, turn us on. Then she turns them against us.

In her photos and videos, and especially in her glammed-up paintings of female bodies, lip gloss swallows you whole, and freckles are frightening. A high heel could batter your skull.

The work flirts and arouses, because it starts with the tools of mass media seduction, skin and wetness, youth and wistfulness, those images that drive high-fashion magazine ads and X-rated films.

But there's no getting off here. Minter's work, layered with questions and keen observations, stops just short of sexy, aiming higher, toward the head. We might think of her as a pornographer, except that her images, up so close, of nostrils and teeth and underarm stubble, are more likely to produce performance anxiety than actual pleasure.

She's been at it for a long time, working in New York since the 1980s, questioning concepts of beauty, commercialism and gender, with great respect from her peers, if not curators and dealers, She was long a sideways mention in the critical litera-

ture, just never quite the star of the show.

That's changed today. In her 60s, Minter is an art-world pet, although not the cuddly kind. Her mix of intellect and edge is just right for the times, and the gallerists and collectors have caught up.

There's a huge body of her work amassed by now and that certainly helps to convey its aims. "Pretty/Dirty," a retrospective currently at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, not only covers the important parts but links them together into a narrative of her career.

Curators Bill Arning and and Elissa Auther start at the beginning, with Minter's series of photos of her mother taken in 1969. They're a pathetic lot of black-and-white scenes, capturing a fading, age-spotted beauty in bath robes and nightgowns. It's all gone to hell, really, but she keeps on trying, applying makeup, dyeing her eyebrows, kicking back on the sofa, smoking cigarettes.

Minter focuses her lens on the things that detract from beauty. *Images provided by MCA Denver*

With her lifetime theme intact, we watch as Minter hones her eye and her painting skills, taking a series of photographs in the 1970s — bits of foil, linoleum floor tiles, a cracked egg — and rendering them in oil.

From there, it's about experimenting and refining. Exploring feminine images in the 1980s and '90s, getting increasing raw with enamel paintings of "Food Porn," embracing the inner-sensuality of corn cobs, artichokes and cucumbers. Going beyond raw with "Porn Grid," a series of paintings of sex scenes of all configurations.

It might seem gratuitous, or exploitative, and it did to many at the time, except it all leads up to what comes next in the show: two decades of well-honed photos, videos and paintings that knock at the center of how we define beauty and crudeness. Minter drives us into a world where sexy makes a few bad turns.

We get magnified, photorealistic paintings of a "Dirty Heel," and "Soiled" toes, decorated with chartreuse polish. A print titled "Sock" emphasizes the marks on skin left by elastic sweat socks. "Blue Poles" zeroes in on eyebrows growing back from a plucking.

The final series of works, titled "Wet," and "Glazed" turns her images more abstract, and more intimidating. Models choke on glitzy jewelry, faces drown in water, mouths drip in murky metals. There's a shine to the pictures, a glistening clarity that mirrors haute couture billboards, but everything is mucked up, blurred, horrified.

It's not just Minter's eye that wows (and repulses) us, but her unusual techniques, which are well-documented in display cases in "Pretty/Dirty."

The "Wet" series happens this way: Minter starts by taking a photo of a model then alters the image on a computer screen. She prints that out and hangs it on the wall under glass, douses the glass with water and shoots again.

That secondary photo is the basis for her painting. Layer upon layer of enamel paint is brushed on a metal canvas in Minter's studio, often by a team of assistants, as the piece is enlarged and brought into shape with some liberal, visual additions. The final enamel layer is dotted on with the finger tips to avoid brush strokes.

Marilyn Minter's "BluePoles." *Images provided by MCA Denver*

A single work can take months to produce, and the result is a product that is full of depth like a painting but flat and finished like a photograph. In fact, it can be difficult to tell photos from paintings in this show, a tactic that keeps Minter's commentary on fashion merchandizing in the forefront.

In a sense it also keeps it from being too heavy-handed, or oblivious. While Minter's ugly twists can feel like a condemnation, her mimicry of fashion's gloss and style come off as a compliment. In interviews, she denies being a critic of polished ads and avoids the label of feminist.

She's just making observations, she says, although they're sharp, and powerful. "Pretty/Dirty" comes to a climax in the MCA basement, where Minter's recent video "Smash" runs in repeat. The movie features a dancer, from the calves down, dressed in ankle jewels and silver high heels, sloshing about in a puddle of what looks to be liquid mercury. At some point, as the music pulses and the pace increases, she kicks her left foot forward smashing through a pane of clear glass, and sending shards flying through the air.

It's a metaphor, of course, a delicate, female foot, somehow empowered and crashing through an established barrier, and it borders on being too conspicuous. But Minter's visuals give it amazing pull, and "Pretty Dirty" gives it a muscular, attractive context. The video is mesmerizing and best saved for last.

This is Minter's might on full display, refined over a career, to seduce you with eye candy and to make the journey, no matter where it ends, a blast. She turns simple things complicated, empty things compelling, pretty things very, very dirty.

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A daring attempt to cross the border

Mexico City's annual Zona Maco art fair draws dealers and collectors from across the world and has helped develop a high-end art market in Mexico's capital. This installation appeared in a booth shared by two Berlin galleries, Dittrich & Schlechtriem and Alexander Levy. *Ray Mark Rinaldi, The Denver Post*

STORY 3

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

MEXICO CITY »

North America's largest city has long deployed modernism as a way of proving that it's a contemporary place. Within the natural decay of a crowded, 400-year-old metropolis, where buildings crumble and sidewalks disappear, where corruption is a fact and hope for broad economic prosperity fleeting, there's been a five-decade, government-sponsored intervention of sleek office towers, high-tech transportation systems and, in so many plazas, over-scaled pieces of public art made from steel or concrete.

The old crashes into the new in ways that are meaningful and undeniably beautiful. Downtown, aging cathedrals are smudged in pollution. But in the Condesa neighborhood, sleek, architecture-forward apartment buildings rise that would look more at home in San Francisco or Berlin. On the broad boulevards of gentrifying Roma Norte, high-speed bus lines set international standards for efficiency, but on the rooftops hang a tangle of clotheslines where laundry dries and the conveniences other countries take for granted seem worlds away.

Art is flourishing here right now — really flourishing — and it's easy to see why.

Since mankind invented paint, art has had a unique ability to delineate the haves from the have-nots. There is much to be said about this conflict between past and present, progress and stagnation.

It's hard to know yet how much of this story will be told in Denver this summer, but the potential is beguiling. Dozens of Mexico City artists will show new work as part of the Biennial of the Americas — outdoor installations, painting, sculpture, video, performance pieces.

The biennial's mission is to explore the culture of the entire hemisphere, but for its third edition, the art program will focus on one place in hope that the conversation goes deeper. The choice of Mexico City isn't random; a third of Denver's population has Mexican roots and its capital sizes up its dreams and failures.

Mexico City's progressive galleries show an international roster of visual artists. At the Labor gallery, Santiago Sierra's "La Lona," exploring the loss of individuality in contemporary life, consisted of 15 people standing under a white shroud. Only one spectator at a time was allowed into the gallery. *Ray Mark Rinaldi, The Denver Post*

"We need to have this conversation," said Lauren Wright, the biennial's in-house curator. "But how can we do it in creative ways?"

And in honest ways.

American perceptions of Mexico's interior are clouded by media reports of brutal crimes and drug trafficking. No one denies that's a fact of life — in some places.

But Mexico City is a thriving, safe, culturally rich metropolis that Americans might love as much as Paris if they got to know it. Museums, shopping and restaurants go hand-in-hand with traffic, beggars and endless noise, all adding up to the "complex, complicated and totally cosmopolitan" place it is, as Wright puts it.

Artists are invited to report the story however they see it, and the biennial is fostering the exchange on several levels. Its Ambassadors program is sponsoring four, 10-week residencies. Two Mexico City artists, Cristobal Gracia and Daniel Monroy Cuevas, will come here and two Denver artists, Matt Scobey and Melissa Furness, go there. All will showcase their work at the McNichols Building in Civic Center this July.

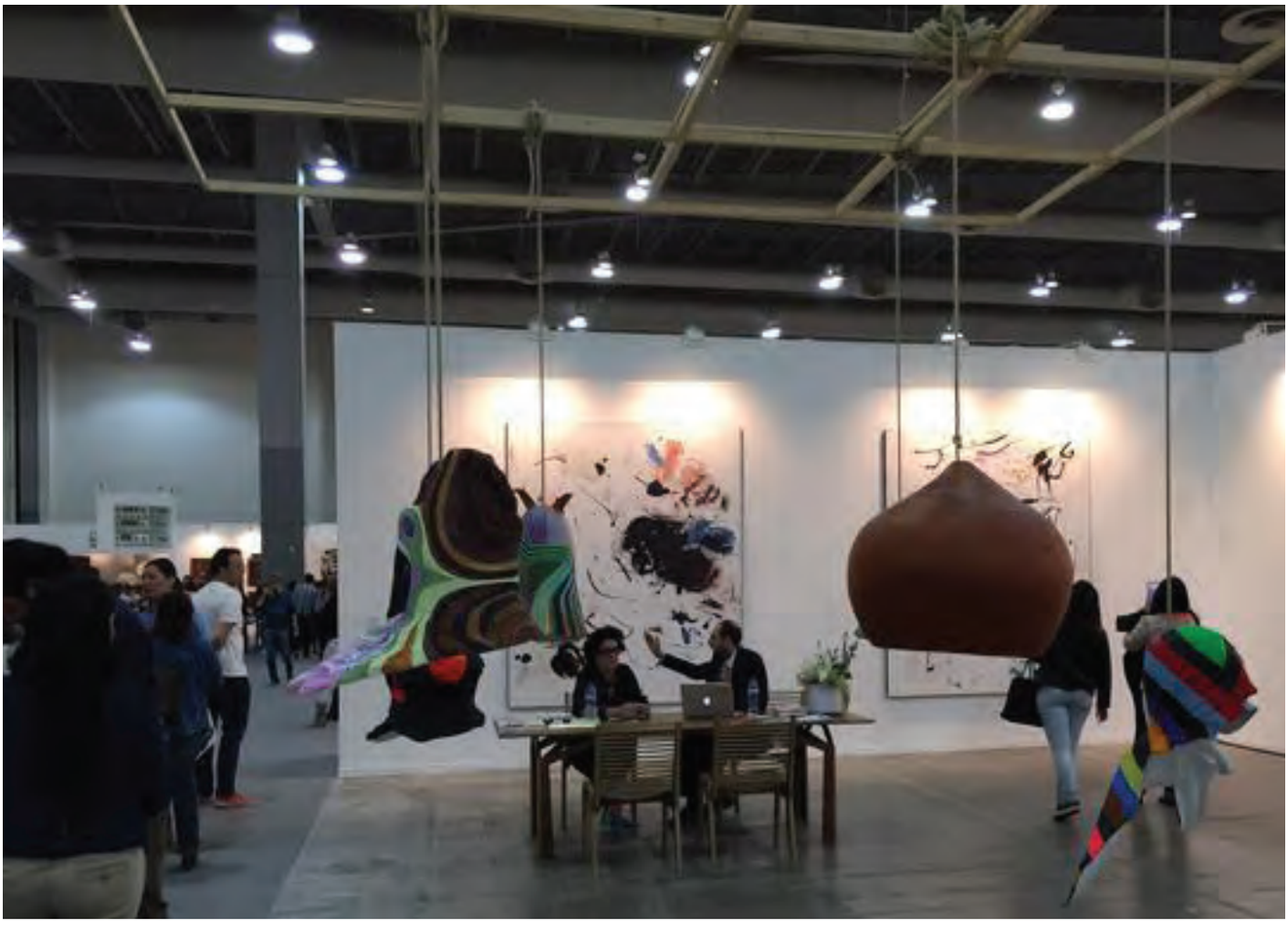
There will be a large group show of Mexican artists at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, likely to include important names. Artist Erick Meyenberg, now creating a performance piece at a Mexico City shopping mall featuring girls from a local military academy, will stage a related piece at Denver International Airport.

Marcela Armas will produce an interactive work to reside concurrently in Denver and Mexico City. An all-female collective called De Sitio is hatching a project involving artists, architects and designers.

Most of the work is being dreamed up right now, just four months out, as artists meet one another and explore possibilities. It is a grand experiment in process, a risk considering that projects could succeed or fail. Whatever the outcome, the display will be public, stretching from downtown to DIA.

Meet the ambassador

Matt Scobey looks like a Colorado guy. He's 6 feet tall and thin, blond and blue-eyed and obsessed with his bike, a royal-blue American Eagle he's been riding around Mexico City during his residency.



The Zona Maco art fair takes place every February, spread across 12,000 square feet in Mexico City's giant Centro Banamex convention center. Dealers come from more than 20 countries to show and sell work. This booth hosted the Heinrich Ehrhardt Gallery from Madrid. *Ray Mark Rinaldi, The Denver Post*

All this makes him stand out in a place where, generally speaking, people are shorter and browner than Scobey, and most locals know better than to bike in a zone where cars and pedestrians see traffic rules as a choice.

But it allows him a unique perspective for soaking in what he calls "the constant balance between beauty and brutality" in the city. If you're going to be an ambassador, you've got to represent; and Scobey is experiencing Mexico City in visceral ways.

Two weeks in, he got food poisoning so bad he dropped 25 pounds in just a few days. His bike was impounded by customs and he had to pay about $250, cash, to get it back.

Scobey, the first ambassador to get started, is a graphic designer, though he also makes sculptures out of concrete, and this is where he has connected creatively. Concrete defines Mexico City, the streets, the best houses, and mostly notably, the sidewalks, which alternately devolve into ruts and rise into platforms. They've been paved over so many times a curb can easily rise 16 inches off the street. For Americans, the sidewalks here can feel like one big tripping hazard. "You can see the layering of the eras in their development," Scobey said.

Like the other ambassador artists, Scobey's task is to make something out of his experiences, and that has happened organically. Working in his studio, a sunny shotgun of a room six paces wide and 20 long on the fourth floor of an artists co-op in the Centro district, he has poured batch after batch of concrete, molding it into various things.

He's come up with a plan to make tiles, maybe hundreds of them, about 1 foot square, and lay them on the floor of the McNichols Building. He's imprinting them with plastic trash bags scavenged from the streets: crinkly, veiny, tactile patterns.

Scobey won't finalize ideas until he returns to the U.S. March 23. He is considering thickness and color, whether to layer them flat or raise them off the floor, or leave cracks, like the sidewalks themselves. He wants to wrap in notions about urban ecology and the underground economy he's seen with the thousands of vendors who line the streets in the Centro.

"Some days the pollution is intense here. Some days the smells are intense," he said. "It's an intense visual and auditory reality all the time."

Tania Pérez Córdova's piece at LuLu gallery consisted of three counterfeit coins. One was placed on the gallery floor, the other resided in the gallery owner's pocket. To see the third, you had to walk two blocks to this juice vendor and ask her to present it. *Ray Mark Rinaldi, The Denver Post*

Two art worlds

In many ways, Mexico City is as posh as London or Los Angeles. In the swank Polanco district, Gucci and artier shops fuel a daytime bustle that pricey nightclubs sustain into the early morning. Bars are world-class, people dress up for breakfast and the place is wired: Free Wi-Fi in the plazas.

But you don't have to look hard to see another side. Children selling candy on the streets. People who walk long distances because they can't afford a 33-cent subway ride. Even folks with good government jobs talk of working 10 or 12 hours a day.

Everyone complains about corruption, and it's visible on the streets. A few blocks from the Zocalo, police stand by as prostitutes work a busy avenue, many of them teenagers. For $7, you can get a girl and a place to complete the transaction.

Such duality defines the city, and it's reflected in the burgeoning art scene.

The city's annual art fair, Zona Maco, is in its 12th year. It has grown nearly as big and expensive as the great fairs in Basel, Hong Kong and Miami and draws dealers from Berlin, Bogota and Manhattan, plus an international corps of collectors (this year, there were a dozen from Colorado and they spent money).

The February fair has pumped up Mexico's reputation as an art center and created a high-end market. The city supports a number of posh galleries where customers ring the bell to get in and peruse works with price points you'd see in Chelsea.

There is at the same time a grassroots wave rushing in. Complementing Zona Maco is an upstart called Material Art Fair, founded by expat Brett Schultz two years ago. It presents small and interesting galleries with younger, experimental artists and has given the fair scene more credibility.

In 2009, a group of artists developed SOMA, an alternative, upper-level art school. Artists come from throughout Mexico for two-year residencies where they take formal classes in history and theory. In the summer, SOMA runs a program, in English, drawing from across the globe.

The school has coalesced a community of young artists and emerged as a hip center for culture. Its Wednesday art talks, convening around 8:30 p.m., are packed.

Small galleries are popping up throughout the city, often produced by artists and independent curators who show daring work that rivals that in any capital city. LuLu, a project space opened by curator Chris Sharp two years ago, presents international artists in a room the size of a one-car garage.

The work is highly conceptual and sometimes profound. LuLu's recent biennial show in February featured one piece by artist Tania Pérez Córdova that consisted of three counterfeit coins. One was placed on he gallery floor, the other resided in the gallery owner's pocket. To see the third, you had to walk two blocks to a juice vendor squeezing oranges on the street and ask her to present it.

At the Labor space across town, Santiago's Sierra's "La Lona" consisted of a single piece inside a large, white-cube gallery that had 15 people standing under a single cloak. Just

Lauren Wright with a mural by Michael Ortiz and Jonathan Lambural . *Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post*

Matt Scobey, the first of the Biennial of the America's Ambassadors, is spending 10 weeks inMexico Citymaking art to show in Denver. *Ray Mark Rinaldi, The Denver Post*

standing there. Only one spectator was allowed to enter the gallery at a time.

Artists here make their own opportunities. There's Bikini Wax, in Condesa, a renegade operation run by Cristobal Gracia that's part gallery, part party house. It hosts a different exhibit, and a rollicking opening, most every weekend.

In the Santa María la Ribera neighborhood, artists have turned an old house into a studio and resident space called Casa Imelda. It's shabby but full of energy. In San Rafael, there's Casa Mauaad, a compound of galleries and bedrooms that hosts artists and exhibits from near and far.

Mirroring cities

Lauren Wright saw a number of parallels between what was happening in Mexico City and Denver. She came on board as the biennial's artistic director last August and was charged with building its cultural program in just a year.

Denver has RedLine, an exhibition space in Curtis Park founded by Laura Merage in 2008, which provides free studio space to developing artists, shapes careers and exhibits work.

It's not like Mexico's SOMA — not a school, less formal — but it has connected regional artists in a way that is bringing some definition of what it means to be a Colorado artist in the 21st century.

Several RedLine artists helped develop Tank Studios in south Denver, a co-op inhabited by talented up-and-comers. Local artists Adam Milner and Jeromie Dorrance opened Dateline, a tiny gallery in RiNo that doubles as a living room.

South Broadway gallerist Adam Gildar, who specializes in emerging talent, separated his business interests out and opened the ArtPlant, a non-profit residency program that has started hosting out-of-town artists for an extended period.

For the Ambassadors program, Wright signed on Gildar and SOMA's Carla Herrera-Prats. The two selected the four Ambassadors artists and work with them closely as they are developing their ideas for the McNichols show.

By mingling creatives from here and there, the Denver Biennial hopes to capitalize on the energy of these artist-driven things "bubbling up in both places," said Wright, and in a way that inspires artists to continue making their city's culture more interesting while making interesting work themselves.

Wright asks the question: "How can we learn from one another, in a concrete way, about how to make something out of nothing?"

THE DENVER POST

Nov. 15, 2015

New World gothic

The Denver Art Museum hopes to shore up a family legacy with an exhibit of paintings by Andrew Wyeth and son Jamie

As evidenced by such works as his "Kleberg"(1984), Jamie Wyeth has painted people and animals with equal intensity throughout his career. *Image provided by the Denver Art Museum*

STORY 4

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

Risk comes in varying degrees in the art world. Sometimes things that seem safe are quite perilous — and that is the case with any exhibit involving Andrew Wyeth.

The public loves Wyeth, especially his famously evocative portraits of forlorn women, and the new retrospective of his work at the Denver Art Museum is likely to draw big crowds. I hope it does.

But anyone who goes should keep one analytical eye open, and one ear listening to the valid criticisms that dogged Wyeth his entire life and have continued after his death in 2009.

Was he a master painter or an uninspired realist? A prolific scene copier obsessed with detail, yet lacking in imagination? Was he sentimental or saccharine? Was he an independent thinker who ignored the modern art trends of his century

or a man with outdated methods, repeating old tricks?

The challenge of "Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio" is to put us on the positive side of those three questions, and I'm not sure it does. You still come away moved more by Wyeth's trademark moodiness than anything else. He's a manipulator of emotions rather than a man of innovative, intellectual ideas. There's a darkness in his palette — in the stares of the people he paints, the hues of his barren landscapes — and putting so many of his works together only magnifies the cinematic effects, making mystery seem like a go-to antic.

That this show also includes the work of his son Jamie, successful and talented in his own right, only adds to the sentimental tally.

But here is why it's a genuine hit: Because curator Timothy Standring has put together such a complete and winning picture of the elder artist himself, borrowing paintings from museums and private collections across the country. He includes those forlorn portraits, but doesn't rely on them to get across Andrew Wyeth's best talents. This isn't a show of "Helga" paintings — those pictures Wyeth did late in his career, in secret, of model Helga Testorf that toured the country extensively and almost did in the artist's legacy because of their melancholy excess.

Jamie Wyeth remains a prolific artist. This portrait of Andy Warhol positioned behind a found screen door was created this year. *Provided by the Denver Art Museum*

What we are left with is Wyeth's dedication — his commitment to portraying the world he lived in, the rural people around his farm, the seaside terrain at his Maine retreat. Wyeth labored his whole life trying to perfect his vision on canvas.

We are left with his Americanness. His grasp of the New World gothic may be exaggerated, but it serves as an effective recording of a certain era in history, matching in paint those same strained qualities that photographers Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Diane Arbus captured on film. His devotion to realism at a time when everything else was going abstract presents him as an iconoclast, a resister of current mania, a rebel.

And we are left with his brush, a most amazing thing. No American painter was more skilled than Wyeth or possessed a greater ability to make marks with his artist's tools, or with tempera paint, or pencil or — and this is the revelation to most folks — watercolor.

Works such as "Roaring Reef" (1941) show the artist letting go of precision in that way that watercolor demands as it soaks into paper on its own accord. He clearly understands and exploits the medium. "Winter," a watercolor and graphite piece from 1946, is a study for another work, and a hint at the process of an artist more interested in connecting closer to the soul than the head. It is murky and revealing. These are terrific inclusions on Standring's part.

Andrew Wyeth's "The German" (1975) is one of the more unexpected pieces in the Denver exhibit. *Provided by the Denver Art Museum*

There are reasons to appreciate the portraits, though more reasons to stare at monumental landscapes, including 1953's "Snow Flurries." Wyeth has a stunning command of the chunkiness and flexibility of tempera paint, zooming in on tiny weeds and delicately touching out tufts of snow. It's a barren place that he depicts, but it feels full of earthy grit.

While Wyeth opted out of the abstract regimen of his peers, you see he was influenced by the times. His perspective on the outdoor scene "The Hunter" (1943) — which gazes down on its subject from the top of a tree, through its gnarled branches — is that of a modernist, seeking new vantage points on the world around him.

Still, it is constrained in a way that feels out of sync within the broad generation that gave us Salvatore Dali, Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock. While Andrew Wyeth was painting Helga, Andy Warhol was churning out prints of Mick Jagger and Liza Minelli.

One wonders whether Wyeth had been born two centuries earlier, before art got weird, or two decades later, in the era of anything goes, if he would have escaped critic after critic railing on his conventional ways.

This was the great advantage for Jamie Wyeth, and one the son took full advantage of. Yes, he grew up on the family farm in Pennsylvania, and, no doubt, he was cultural royalty, with a lineage started by grandfather N.C. Wyeth, who made his fortune as a popular illustrator. For certain, he inherited the family's spooky gene.

But Jamie is naturally looser, a freer spirit, an experimenter, who never looks stuck for a moment in this career retrospective. He actually comes off as ahead of his time, rather than behind it.

His most famous work, 1968's "Portrait of Lady," captures a lone sheep staring directly at the viewer. It's full of detail, especially the animal's woolly coat, yet imagination, too; this sheep has personality, and you wonder what it is thinking. It has PETA-level dignity.

Jamie Wyeth, now 69, spent the bulk of his career as a portraitist with an attitude, equally framing people and animals, and delving deep into the psychological essence of both. His choice to concentrate on oils allowed him a broader, brighter palette than his

Jamie Wyeth's "Portrait of Lady" (1968), perhaps his most recognized oil painting, is both precise and abstract. *Provided by the Denver Art Museum*

father's. There are shocking yellows and bold oranges in his work.

He has his sentimental moments. His 1984 "Kleberg," featuring a white dog with a black ring around one eye, gets dangerously close to a maudlin family tradition. But it's composed in a such a way — the dog is off-center and gets equal billing with a large basket — that you don't get overwhelmed by cutie-pie feelings. Instead, you explore what the artist is up to, what he wants you to understand about the scene.

Unlike his father, who was criticized for making the same gestures again and again, Jamie experiments as he matures. His "Seven Deadly Sins" series (2005-08) uses sea gulls — eating, sleeping, mating — to depict all that biblical badness. The series is real and abstract, and slightly threatening. It has Jamie's trademark anatomical precision, but it's open to interpretation: sacred, secular, sexual.

He's an artist of his time, inviting us to speculate, to accept what's real and imagine what's not. The apple fell just far enough from the tree; he's a Wyeth, but emerges as an individual.

In that way, Standring succeeds in drawing a line between father and son. DNA gave them both innate skills, and a confidence to do what they wanted, and both worked very hard, despite the fact that they had the money to just dabble. You sense a healthy combination of nature and nurture in the dynamic.

If this were a competition, neither would lose. They'd end up on the same side of a relay race that has lasted a full century. They helped each other's credibility.

If there's an effort in this exhibition to redeem Andrew Wyeth's name in critical circles, then his accomplishments are clearly brought to life. He gave us compelling landscapes, and he gave us Jamie. Not a bad legacy after all.

THE DENVER POST

Nov. 3, 2015

An opera within an opera without a clue

Does American opera matter? "Great Scott" says yes, but offers a weak argument. *Karen Almond, provided by Dallas Opera*

STORY 5

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

"Great Scott" is an opera about every beastly thing about opera, so it is possible the work's inventors meant to create a beast. If so, they have succeeded.

Composer Jake Heggie and librettist Terrence McNally use the show to spoof the art form's excesses and egos, and freely indulge their own. They turn out a tale of divas and divos, great composers and wannabes, love and insanity, art and death, and football, which may be their biggest mistake.

It seems, in this tall, Texas tale, that the resurrection of 19th century composer Vittorio Bazzetti's long-lost "Rosa Dolorosa" is about to premiere on the same night as the Super Bowl, and the local Grizzlies have made it to the big game. Oh no. It's a trail of tribulations for the famous American mezzo Arden Scott (sung by Joyce DiDonato) who has returned to her hometown American Opera Company to stage the discovery. Will anyone show up to hear it?

More importantly, will she rekindle her high-school romance with architect Sid Taylor (Nathan Gunn) and leave her career behind?

Less importantly, will the conductor and the stage manager hook up, will the tenor take his shirt off, will the ruthlessly ambitious soprano steal Arden's spotlight and maybe her career?

Screwball comedy, romance, melodrama — Hollywood used to make movies like this all the time, although, generally speaking, one at a time, and the formula feels familiar. Take him-and-her superstars, team them with the top writers of the day, hand the whole thing over to a director who knows how to shape a hit (here, that is veteran Jack O'Brien).

But the Dallas Opera, which premiered this effort Friday night, isn't MGM in the 1950s. It aims higher and routinely succeeds at making things deeper than the kind of fluff that might star Lana Turner or Lucille Ball; material that doesn't mine old rubes, like puffy tenors and sopranos hurling themselves off cliffs, or new rubes, like wardrobe malfunctions that expose a performer's butt. The jokes can be funny — Tony-winning Terrence McNally funny — but we see most of them coming.

As for the plot, it threatens to get deep, and then fumbles the ball. Things come to a dramatic point in the endless, mandatory mad scene in the second act, where Scott is visited by the ghost of Vittorio Bazzetti himself. He lectures about how the art form is bigger then the people who put it on stage and a soprano's job is to serve her musical master. Great works endure but voices are lost to time, he goes on.

Well, not in 2015, and operas fans know well that no one really dies anymore. They can watch Beverly Sills on YouTube 24/7, or download the remastered Maria Callas recordings that just came out and sound better than the originals. They can "like" Luciano Pavarotti's Facebook page.

When they do, it becomes clear how composer-centered this anti-opera point is: It's the music that's dead without the singers. Operas only exist in that moment when a human being breathes in air and breathes out those high notes. The whole exercise is self-defeating for a work that struggles desperately to be contemporary with characters tweeting and skateboarding, their cell phones going off at inappropriate moments.

Scott gets thin choices over whether to sing on or stop. She's beloved by the masses but can't find true love. Her plan B, the architect, is a small-town bore. Neither option is better than flinging yourself off a cliff so what's the point? DiDonato brings verve to the role; she's super charming, but pushed too hard vocally, not enough dramatically.

Heggie's music is adroit and complicated, swinging back and forth between the opera we are watching and the 1835 opera within it, between the Sondheim-influenced present and the Rossini-dominated past. He has versatile skills and it's great to see the man who gave us "Dead Man Walking" and "Moby-Dick" have some fun.

He challenges his singers, burying them in boatloads of bel canto. Characters blurt out extravagant trills and roars just in passing or, in one scene, the entire length of the "Star-Spangled Banner." The fake masterpiece by the fictional Bazzetti is supposed to be ridiculous — Donizetti plus Bellini plus some Strauss and Wagner, all on steroids — so he recreates every vocal trick ever imagined.

This works, for the most part, but he can be on shaky ground. Imitation is flattering, unless it's one of those bad Jack Nicholson imitations people do when they're drunk. Still, Heggie's confidence is endearing. The places where he nails the parody are the best thing about "Great Scott."

There are other good things: A strong role for a countertenor, which Anthony Roth Costanzo handles fearlessly, and a meaningful overture, something new works often eschew. The orchestra in Dallas, under Patrick Summers, played like it was grateful to have the material. Ailyn Pérez, as the scheming second soprano, actually does end up stealing the show.

Set designer Bob Crowley has a few spectacular moments. The fictional opera is played

Frederica von Stade tells Joyce DiDonato, and the rest of the world, that "American Opera is here to stay" in the Dallas Opera's "Great Scott." *Karen Almond, provided by Dallas Opera*

toward backstage, with the singers facing away from the real audience and performing to an imaginary one in the opposite direction. The bright stage lights are blinding and we really do feel the pressure of delivering the goods in a big house.

And, yes, it can be a hoot. "Rosa Dolorosa" is subtitled "The Daughter of Pompei" which isn't a good lineage for anyone brag on. The plot calls for Rosa to hurl herself into Mount Vesuvius as a human sacrifice meant to keep the volcano form erupting, thereby saving Pompei from ruin. We all know how well that worked out.

There are so many keen, insider jokes about opera that your enjoyment depends on how much you know about it, or care about its makers. If you get worked up over how stage managers are taken for granted or how rude critics can be, or how a successful career disrupts a singer's social life, this is the opera for you.

You wait long for those laughs to lead to something more important, like Heggie and McNally did with their "Dead Man Walking," but both words and music veer off in too many directions. The piece wants to make a point about the state of opera, about how it tries too hard to stay relevant, but its own shameless mugging transforms it into the same target.

There's a thin moment near the end when one supporting player, the great Frederica von Stade, proclaims "American Opera is here to stay," though "Great Scott" has already argued otherwise and she sounds silly making such an obvious declaration.

Plus, enough with all this talk about opera's constant battle against irrelevancy. This opera, its creators, and any customer who paid $100-plus understand fully the power and vibrancy of today's opera or they would not have taken part in such a grand effort. Anybody inside opera knows it's doing just fine; audiences are in flux, but the show goes on, and it's so good so often.

Opera has always experimented, moved forward. All those whines about finances are really just part of the American nonprofit fundraising scheme; I'm not saying that's a bad strategy, just that it's a strategy and kind of depressing for the rest of us when folks go on like the world is ending, or that anyone actually believes that.

Today's composers, librettists, singers, stage managers — they're just making art, doing their jobs and, more often than not, succeeding.

THE DENVER POST

Nov. 29, 2015

Mad at DIA's addition? Move on.

This sculpture, created by sculptor Ned Kahn, is called Field of Air and moves and shifts with the wind that comes through the plaza between the terminal and the new Westin DIA hotel at the south end of Denver International Airport. *Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post*

STORY 6

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

Public opinion is split down the middle when it comes to the new hotel and transit center at Denver International Airport. Some people are just happy the project is done after five years of planning and cost overruns, pleased there's a place to stay on-site before eye-aching, 6 a.m. flights. Others will be mad at it, forever, for blocking views of the beloved Jeppesen Terminal, one of the most important pieces of architecture in the Western United States.

It didn't have to be that way. For $600 million in public money, airport management, despite its multiple excuses, could have come up with something better, a building just as unique and unifying as the quirky, tented icon architects Jim Bradburn and Curt Fentress sketched out on a cocktail napkin a quarter-century ago. The lack of a complement turns the new structure into an insult.

I think it's important to acknowledge the communal resentment that exists, to legitimize the anger or loss or whatever you are feeling. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Mourn.

Now enough of that. Time to move on.

On a more positive note, the new hotel and rail station is its own kind of accomplishment, a success for Gensler, the design firm that took the lead on the project in 2011, after the original master plan architect, Santiago Calatrava, split from the scene. Calatrava's exit agreement demanded DIA avoid using the graceful, white structural elements the architect is famous for — and which organically connected the new construction to Jeppesen's snowy-peaked roof. Without all that white, the building was always going to be the wrong kind of standout, no matter what.

In press materials, Gensler is taking full credit for the project, giving none to Calatrava, but common sense casts doubt on that claim. It's hard to know who came up with what at this point, but the core concepts and many of the schematic elements were in Calatrava's early design drawings, for which DIA paid $12.9 million. (If Calatrava's work isn't part of the final design, DIA certainly has a lot of explaining to do).

Either way, Gensler made it happen, engineering the building in a cost-effective way and choosing the materials, including the dark glass face that puts it in such sharp contrast with Jeppesen.

So, instead of the swooping swan shape Calatrava envisioned for the main hotel building, we get something reasonably affordable and less natural — less soft and supple and European, and more forceful and no-nonsense and boldly American. The structure remains wildly distinctive, thanks to a sharp dip in the center of its long horizontal plane, which was Gensler's idea. But it's no longer a bird; I've heard it alternately referred to as the moustache building, or the sunglasses building.

The hotel is the visible part of the project, although not the most public. There's the ground-level transit station to the south where the RTD commuter rail line will begin arriving in April. On the north side sits a massive outdoor plaza connecting the new building to the airport's existing main terminal at level five. The project's most ambitious gesture is a curved, glass-and-steel awning that stretches horizontally from the back of the hotel toward the airport, giving cover to pedestrians crossing from train to plane. It's an impossibly long, engineering marvel at 150 feet — as long as a 15-story building is high — with no supports along the way.

And just to keep things symmetrical, there's an identical one hovering over the train tracks in front. Both are exuberant and fully modern — a nice bit of branding for the city's premiere gateway.

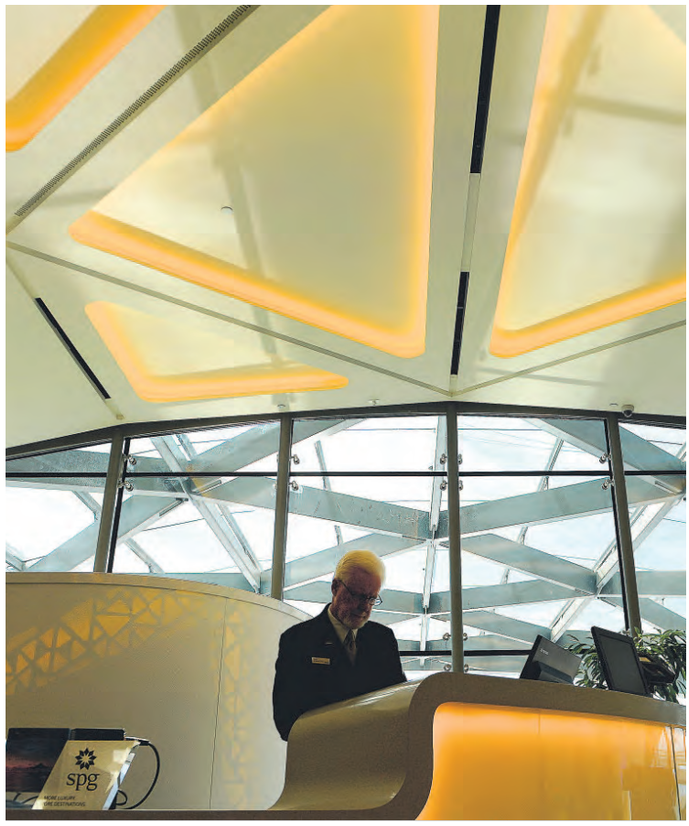
The whole addition feels larger-than-life when you walk around it and the relevant numbers explain why. The project encompasses more than 730,000 square feet of developed space. The bottom floors host a 37,500-square-foot conference center, including a grand ballroom that can hold 750 people. The 519 guest rooms of the Westin Denver International Airport start on the sixth floor.

The Westin's lobby is on floor six as well, and it's been outfitted in the sort of clam-shell, space-age design that was pioneered by architect Eero Saarinen in his landmark 1962 TWA terminal at New York's JFK airport. The predominant interior color is white (take that, Calatrava), expressed energetically through a gracefully arched ceiling that follows the shape of that monumental awning that connects outside. The reception desks, the lounge furniture and the bar are ultra-contemporary. There's a clean feeling to it all, somewhere between Apple store and a trendy nightclub.

The guest rooms maintain that present-day styling. They have particularly generous, rectangular windows that span wall to wall without any mullions, framing the Front Range as if it were a work of art. The higher rooms in the rear also have a spectacular view of Jeppesen's unique roof from above.

The other big interior move is an 11th-floor pool and fitness center. The recreational facility is directly below the building's dipping roofline and its ceiling reflects the exterior shape, sagging in the middle and keeping a human scale to expansive spaces. It's memorable.

That's mainly for guests, of course, but the overall project holds great hope in terms of public space, because of the massive, elevated plaza that connects everything. The brick-covered expanse is a whopping 82,000 square feet, nearly one and a half times the size of a football field, and it shares the lovely mountain vistas that define the site. The airport has hinted at various community events on this vast platform — farmers markets, concerts, car shows, volleyball tournaments. It has built-in fasteners to anchor rows of exhibitor tents.



Concierge Tom Ratty gets the front desk prepared for opening at the new Westin DIA hotel at the south end of Denver International Airport. *Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post*

It's hard, perhaps, for Denverites to picture a time when they might linger at their airport, when it might be more than a connecting point for a weekend jaunt to Las Vegas or a Monday morning business trip to Chicago. It will be up to the airport to program it meaningfully, to put on events that are attractive, diverse and easy to access, where folks can afford to park.

Architecture can be a powerful tool here to remake the role of the airport in civic life, and the options are enhanced by the arrival of the RTD rail service, which will make it easier than ever to get there. No doubt, DIA has some work to do on the image front.

Development can bring amenities to all, but it also brings responsibility to the administrators charged with making the most of it. DIA keeps the planes running on time but so far has squandered chances to connect its evolving design elements with people who come and go — its customers, or more precisely, its citizen owners. The signage is routinely lacking, the security gates are unattractive, crammed awkwardly into Jeppesen's great hall. Even the recently built waiting area, the "cell-phone lot" is aggressively anti-passenger, confusingly located on the wrong side of the highway.

A people-friendly plaza, built with the people's money, is a big opportunity, and it could set the tone for the inevitable development that will follow on the site. If DIA lives up to its promises and makes it a lively destination, even the biggest Jeppesen fan will forgive its design for bypassing the only bit of context within five miles, for ignoring Denver's only internationally recognized building. A truly public plaza would make the moving on — that we all must do — a lot easier.

THE DENVER POST

May 3, 2015

What price tag for culture?

As a vote on the SCFD tax looms next year, it's time to rethink the piggy bank for the arts

Denver Post file photos

STORY 7

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

Not everyone remembers the dark days of Colorado culture, just before the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District was formed in 1988, but the stories still get told. Plants dying at the botanic garden, lights burning out at the art museum, zookeepers struggling to feed their charges.

A quarter-century later, it's hard to sort folklore from fact, but one thing is certain: The SCFD made everything better. Since voters in the seven-county metro region agreed to a new sales tax, museums, theaters and education centers have taken on a new vibrancy. These days, the Front Range boasts world-class attractions with high ambitions for serving the community.

Defining that "community" though, has gotten harder over the years. Cultural tastes have changed and so has the geography. Downtown Denver's institutions once had a monopoly on indoor leisure time; now entertainment options are dispersed. The number of cultural organizations has ballooned and every city and town seems to have its own art center where people gather to enjoy plays, painting displays and history exhibits.

SCFD will be back on the ballot for a third time in 2016, and discussions are underway about how a reauthorized district should operate, taking into account the new realities and future trends.

65.5%

Tier 1: The region's five big cultural groups: the Denver Art Museum, Denver Botanic Gardens, Denver Museum of Nature and Science, Denver Zoo and Denver Center for the Performing Arts.

Requirements: Automatically qualified under SCFD rules.

Collective cut: 65.5 percent

21%

Tier 2: Currently, 26 midsize groups with such diverse missions as the Butterfly Pavilion, Opera Colorado, Denver Film Society, Colorado Railroad Museum and the Arvada Center.

Requirements: Must have an annual income above $1.5 million.

Collective cut: 21 percent

13.5%

Tier 3: Currently, 247 smaller groups across the region, including Museo de las Americas, Buntport Theater, Lafayette Arts Commission.

Requirements: Must be a nonprofit operating for at least three years, that offers "enlightenment and entertainment."

Collective cut: 13.5 percent

The stakes are high. SCFD now collects and distributes about $50 million a year and that could grow to as much as $87 million by 2030, when the next SCFD period would end. The 278 groups that share its money are angling for their piece of the pie. Voters are starting to watch, too, since it will be up to them to decide how — even if — tax money should be spent on culture.

It's not easy to understand the SCFD's complicated funding system, though it all comes down to who gets how much. But there are three large questions that voters will want answered as ideas for reform are worked out.

Question 1: Are the right arts groups getting the money? Answer: Probably not.

The bulk of SCFD funds — 65.5 percent — goes to just five large, cultural institutions in Denver — the Denver Art Museum, Denver Zoo, Denver Botanic Gardens, Denver Museum of Nature and Science and the Denver Performing Arts Center. They are SCFD's Tier I groups.

That amount surely made sense 25 years ago when the funding system was created. Culture was centralized in the city and those groups were in desperate need.

Not today. Rather than being desperate, the major arts groups have gone through massive expansions in the past decade — due, in part, to the stability SCFD has brought. The art museum, nature and science museum and gardens have nearly rebuilt themselves and the zoo is on its way. Private donors and foundations are stepp ing up like never before.

At the same time, scores of smaller groups have established themselves throughout the region, serving with equal vigor, bringing culture to people in their own neighborhoods. These 247 groups, focused on everything from ballet to baroque music — considered Tier III by SCFD — get just 13.5 percent of the funds.

The way we consume art has changed considerably. While the groups are modest individually, collectively they serve about a third of the regional arts audience. In other words, they serve a roughly equal number of people to Tier I, but get one-fifth of the cash.

In the middle is Tier II — 26 groups that fill a crucial role, like the Children's Museum, Colorado Symphony, Opera Colorado and the Museum of Contemporary Art — which splits the remaining 21 percent.

These groups need a bigger cut, as well. They also serve a third of cultural audiences but many are hurting financially the way the big groups were when SCFD was created. If we don't cut them a better deal, the symphony and opera — which draw huge crowds and play important roles in the economy — could be gone in a decade.

A significant shift in funding is possible. Tier I groups would suffer from a cut, no doubt, but they have a greater ability to attract foundation grants, and recruit deep-pocketed board members and professional development staffs that would

help withstand a decrease. The art museum and the nature and science museum each got more than $7 million last year — even a 50 percent cut leaves them with sizable public subsidies.

Let's put it another way: A decrease for the large groups wouldn't hurt the region as much as an increase for the smaller groups would help. In fact, it could revolutionize the art scene here in the same way the original SCFD measure did. Every county that contributes to SCFD could have a richer scene with higher-quality offerings.

Question 2: Are we giving arts and culture enough? Or too much? Answer: Changing it either way is intriguing.

The SCFD may be the best bargain around. For just one penny on every $10 we spend, the region enjoys top-notch museums, learning centers, plays, concerts and kid attractions in a stable cultural ecosystem. If SCFD were a stock, the return would be tremendous.

So why not buy a few extra shares and reap even more riches? Pushing the tax up just 20 percent — to 1.2 cents on every $10 — we could raise another $10-$15 million a year.

Distributed with care, that could bring lasting security to dozens of arts groups that we all acknowledge are important but constantly struggle. In the same way SCFD has ensured permanence and quality for the top five institutions, we could do it for the top 20.

What if, for 30 percent more — still a pittance, really — we could go deeper, helping small organizations in Adams, Jefferson and Douglas counties bring the suburbs the same quality of art that city residents get, or pay them to create programs that can replace the cuts in arts education in our schools

Why not dream bigger? What if we doubled the tax to 2 cents on every $10 and in return, got free admission — for everyone, always — at the art museum, gardens, zoo, nature and science museum and more?

Let these groups dangle the possibilities before our eyes and see if we bite.

On the other hand, it's easy to make an argument for a decrease. Just keeping the tax at its current rate guarantees a huge raise for all these groups, especially the big five.

When SCFD started in 1989, the district collected and distributed $13.8 million. It grew to $50 million without the tax levy changing, through the natural expansion of the retail economy.

Based on the projected growth of the Front Range in the coming decade, it's easy to see that blossoming to $87 million by 2030, the final year of any reauthorization by voters. Instead of getting $7 million a year, the art museum and zoo might get $13 million.

Is that the right amount of subsidy for a cultural group? Will their budgets grow proportionally during that time? Do we even want them to if decentralization is the preferred trend?

Perhaps these groups would already owe us free admission and we should ask, in exchange for our "yes" vote on reauthorization, that they decrease tickets prices yearly, right down to zero by 2030.

Or we could demand that the money is distributed more evenly to groups outside of downtown Denver where people are increasingly looking to find their fun.

Currently, SCFD gives Tier I groups $6.56 per patron, Tier II gets $2.53 and Tier III gets $1.36. That means the system puts a higher value on people who consume their art at the DAM over people who go to the Longmont Museum or the Foothills Art

Center or the Cherry Creek Art Fair, on people who go to the Denver Center Theatre Company over people who go to the Arvada Center or Curious Theatre.

The region's arts and cultural groups need to put together a vision for the future of culture — big ideas about accessibility, diversity, stability, about improving our quality of living and civic reputation — and sell it to voters effectively. Otherwise, the notion of cutting their funding will look more attractive.

Kids play at the Discovery Zone area at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. The museum and four other Tier I cultural institutions collectively divide 65.5 percent of the SCFD cultural funds. *Provided by the Denver Museum of Nature & Science*

Question 3. Are there better ways to award funds? Answer: There should be.

Currently, the bulk of SCFD money — the 87 percent for Tier I and Tier II — goes out based on a set formula. The big five get roughly equal shares of the first 65 percent; the 26 midsize groups get money based on an equation that considers their operating budgets and annual paid attendance.

But what if a group doesn't need all that money in a given year? Should they get public funds anyway? What if they secure a huge foundation grant or get cut into the will of a wealthy donor? What if, as in the case of the Clyfford Still Museum, they are sitting on a $100 million endowment they could draw from instead of getting $360,000 a year from taxpayers?

Simply put: There's no needs test, so how do we know they need it?

There's no mechanism to redistribute funds based on current realities, no way to help a group that's having a particular crisis, like Opera Colorado had in 2012, or pull back from a group that's enjoying higher-than-usual revenue, like the Botanic Gardens, which drew huge crowds to its Dale Chihuly glass-art show last summer.

We don't want to punish groups for doing well or reward groups that have gotten themselves in too deep. But it would be better if there were a way to reward innovation and punish waste. It's bad business to hand out money without considering need.

Would it be possible to take a chunk of the SCFD money — say a third — and create a system in which groups have to compete for funds, show how they will use it to improve, give us greater access, do more free programming?

Like a lot of suggestions on the table, it would take a higher level of oversight. Currently, there's no system for evaluating need, for shifting funding year-to-year or adjusting as things change in the next 15 years.

But here's one more question to think about: Doesn't $87 million in public money deserve careful oversight?

THE DENVER POST

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A green experiment in the brown desert

Element House exists off the grid in remote New Mexico. It's a project of the Museum of Outdoor Arts in Englewood.
Florian Holzherr, provided by the Museum of Outdoor Arts

STORY 8

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

ANTON CHICO, N.M. »

The house of the future hasn't forgotten its past.

Curvy and clad in shiny aluminum, Element House may look from afar like some advanced space colony dropped into the dusty brown New Mexico desert, but up close, it has all the comforts of home: pitched roofs, chimneys, picture windows.

Of course, the real beauty of this recently-completed residential experiment is in the way it adapts those familiar shapes into an affordable, efficient dwelling that functions off the energy grid. Those nine chimneys, for example, don't actually serve as flues; they're shafts that let sunshine in and hot air out, lessening the need for artificial lights and pricey climate control.

With its mix of symbolism and purposeful execution, Element House is as much a piece of art as it is architecture, and that makes it an apt project for Englewood's Museum of Outdoor Arts, which has been its chief cheerleader and financial backer. "Element House is about rethinking what an outdoor museum really is and what it

Using passive solar energy and recycling its water, Element House isn't connected to a power grid. It consists of modules made from structural insulated panels, or SIPS. Rooms can be configured in multiple ways. *Photos by Florian Holzherr, provided by the Museum of Outdoor Arts*

can be," said MOA Executive Director Cynthia Madden-Leitner.

The museum has been around since 1981 and it has overlapping missions. The nonprofit institution sponsors installations of site-specific sculpture at various, open-air locations and shows artists in its indoor gallery. It has long been interested in exploring how art and design can contribute to healthy, sustainable landscapes.

Element House started as an exhibit bringing those goals together. The gallery invited the New York architecture firm MOS, headed by Michael Meredith and Hilary Sample, to create an idea for design-forward, environmentally-friendly, modular dwellings that could be replicated inexpensively. The results were featured in a show of drawings and models that went up in 2010.

But MOA realized the potential of the plans and set about making the idea a reality. It found the perfect location: a remote, 90,000-acre ranch near Anton Chico, N.M., where artist Charles Ross is carving a monumental earthwork called "Star Axis" into the side of a mesa.

"Star Axis" is about as unique a piece of art as one can imagine, basically a narrow, 11-story, stone stairway that's aligned with the earth's axis and allows visitors an encapsulated view of a millennia of celestial activity. Ross has been working on it since 1971 and figures he'll finish in a year, or three.

Element House, on a rugged dirt road about 30 miles from Las Vegas, N.M., could eventually serve as a guesthouse where visitors stay while taking in Ross' finished work. In the short term, it's a place where folks who want to contribute to the project's completion can hole up for an early peek.

But Element House stands apart as a marvel of its own. The two-bedroom, one-bath structure is basically a series of connected modules with walls and floors made from structured insulated panels. The SIPS, as they're called, are prefabricated in a factory and assembled together on site. They're easy to get — SIPS can be ordered right off the Internet — and can be connected quickly and cost-effectively and without much construction waste.

Even better, the modules are flexible. Future Element Houses can be bigger or smaller than the 1,543-square-foot model on display. They could be sheathed in other materials, like wood shingles. They could be configured into communities of similar houses near one another, or even connected together in a circle for greater efficiency. The size of individual dwellings can grow or shrink.

On the inside, the first Element House is relentlessly white, otherwise it resembles any home with an open, contemporary plan that has a living room, dining area and kitchen linked together into a single area, with sleeping quarters set off to the side. The home's shape, including its soaring ceilings and the way its private rooms extend from the main space, is derived from the Fibonacci sequence, a mathemati-

Element House exists off the grid in remote New Mexico. It's a project of the Museum of Outdoor Arts in Englewood. *Florian Holzherr, provided by the Museum of Outdoor Arts*

cal growth pattern that appears organically in many natural organisms.

Unlike most suburban ranch homes, Element House employs passive solar energy systems instead of mechanical equipment. Its floor-to-ceiling windows are set at sun-friendly angles and warm the concrete floors during cooler months. The aluminum shingles reflect the sun in extreme heat. Advanced insulation in the wall panels minimizes temperature fluctuation.

The lights are LED and much of its water recycles itself. It's not winterized, though it has most of the basics, a fridge, oven and a stove powered by propane.

It's a high-end building, but it was put together nearly by hand with much of the work a labor of painstaking love done by Sky Madden, Cynthia's son and the project manager who stayed near the site during construction and brought in crews to assist.

"The SIPS panels actually went up pretty fast. You just have to glue them together," said Sky Madden. "They're like Legos in a way."

Element House is already getting noticed. The project won this year's Architecture Design award from the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum in New York. It's a big recognition that will make people pay attention to its possibilities; larger or more elaborate versions of the design could become a reality.

In the meantime, it has a simpler job: it just needs to exist — to test its energy systems in a place where temperatures often exceed 100 degrees, to see how it interacts with the environment and to determine, importantly, if the folks who stay there find the place cozy — not exactly the kind of word architects use, but one that's crucial to the way people live in the real world.

Element House has some advantages there. Its traditional residential shape offers emotional satisfaction. Its size, just one story tall, sets it on a human scale. Its layout, with everything centered around a communal space, gives it a hint of that thing modern designers seek hardest to create — the current day equivalent of a hearth. The house of the future, whether it looks like a space station or the bungalow down the street, will need to be a comfortable place.

THE DENVER POST

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Brushes with greatness

Walter Ufer painted "Bob Abbott and His Assistant" in 1935, late in his career. *Provided by the Denver Art Museum*

STORY 9

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

The Denver Art Museum does a lot of things right, but the best of it comes from its Western art department. Granted, that particular division has an advantage — its shows are right at home here in that vast region's cultural capital, the place where cows were invented, or cowboys anyway, or at least our romanticized version of them.

But it's more than that as the new exhibit "A Place in the Sun" shows once again. The department is doing bedrock research into a field of art that's very much still in development and producing shows that are insightful and thrilling for public consumption. Curators aren't afraid to stick their necks out for the sake of an artist they think deserves wider recognition.

Or, in the case of the current show, two artists, Walter Ufer and E. Martin Hennings. Both painters are already respected names in the Western genre, although with half the recognition of superstars such as Frederic Remington, Albert Bierstadt or Charles Marion Russell. "A Place in the Sun" argues that they are every bit as crucial and both ought to take their spot on the list of great American painters.

The effort, curated by Thomas Brent Smith, is convincing, and the show is broadly appealing, an afternoon in the bright sunlight that's more than welcome during a Colorado winter. Coupling the artists into a single exhibit elevates both by showing how they cut different paths through similar terrain.

Walter Ufer's "Me and Him," a 1918 oil painting. *Provided by the Denver Art Museum*

As a pair, they have much in common. Both were German Americans who studied in Chicago and Munich in the years before World War I. Each developed an obsession with the Southwest and eventually moved to Taos. They were good friends.

And both made the melting pot of New Mexico in the early 20th century their main subject. Working in oils, they made portraits of Indians, Latinos and the Europeans who were arriving in large numbers. With equal verve, they painted the region's unique and colorful natural landscape.

In that way, they captured a certain time in history, an era where old ways were meshing with new, as the show points out. In Hennings' 1925 "The Rabbit Hunt," for example, an Indian from the Taos Pueblo sits proudly atop a brown-and-white spotted horse. He's wearing a knitted sweater but also traditional moccasins, a living example of cultures in transition.

These are American paintings with a distinctly modern twist. The artists have an eye for ordinary people doing everyday things. Hennings shows us Indians riding the trail and a Mexican sheep herder in the field. Ufer offers Mexican sisters reading on a sill and scenes of worship before a crudely made crucifix. While humans are the focus of these paintings, they're not always at the center of them; many scenes are framed as snapshots, something you might come across on a road trip rather than compositions conjured by an artist.

That said, there is a certain glamour about much of the work that elevates the mundane status of the people portrayed and, in its own way, mimics traditional, European painting. There's a purposeful effort to escalate the value of cultural affects and old-world customs. In Ufer's "Their Audience," as one example, the colors and patterns of native costumes are captured in precise detail, shawls and skirts flow and fold in a way that looks overly neat.

With both painters, there is often a brilliant light about the work that reflects a little too well on the character of subjects. This reads two ways, frankly. Sometimes it feels like a dose of respect for an underclass; other times it feels like an oversimplification of "noble savage" proportions.

Frankly, that's an argument against the status of both artists, a prevailing sense that they were discovering something — Christopher Columbus-style — that al-

E. Martin Hennings' "Passing By," a 1924 oil. *Images provided by the Denver Art Museum*

ready had been discovered and were treating it like an exotic commodity. Although to be fair, "A Place in the Sun" doesn't actually hide from any perspective. It's just showing two men who moved their genre into new places, with considerable skill, and captured the imagination of their fans back in the day.

For that, each had his own methods, something the exhibition highlights to explain their differences. Ufer used an alla prima technique that had him layering wet paint on wet paint. His work has a spontaneous feel, a freshness to it, and it almost looks wet a hundred years later.

Hennings is influenced by the German version of Art Nouveau known as Jugenstil. His paintings have a more decorative and formal feel. He was more than happy to pose those he rendered.

In common, though, is an understanding that people can't be separated from place. There is, always, in both painters' work, a sense of nature. Subjects are captured with the mesas, deserts, fields, skies and flowers fully present. Landscape infuses the work as it permeates real life; this is accurate and intuitive portrait-making.

And that is the best argument for elevating their status. They may not have fully understood who they painted, but the commanded what they painted. They put forth the idea that the color of a subject's eyes is as important as the color of the autumn leaves that subject sees around him — that if you paint a man standing on a mountain, then the mountain and the man hold equal status. This is the essence of Western art, the thing that makes it great. And this show is loaded with that kind of greatness.

THE DENVER POST

Aug. 9, 2015

Santa Fe Opera ascends with "Cold Mountain"

Deborah Nansteel and Nathan Gunn in Santa Fe Opera's "Cold Mountain." *Ken Howard, Santa Fe Opera*

STORY 10

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

The musical adaptation of "Cold Mountain" arrived at the Santa Fe Opera on Saturday night with all of the expectations a very good idea provokes.

Charles Frazier's National Book Award winner is a sweeping tale of life, love and death, and opera knows exactly what to do with those things, especially death. There was more promise surrounding the premiere: A first opera from the talented composer Jennifer Higdon, a starring role for the art form's best-loved baritone, Nathan Gunn.

A few notes in, it was clear the pressure brought out the best in everyone. "Cold Mountain," the opera, turns out to be a special piece of American art that examines both our fortitude and failures. It is challenging to hear and true to its source material.

That's a particular compliment considering it took endless compromises on the part of Higdon and librettist Gene Scheer to condense a 356-page Civil War epic into a two-act opera that's less than three hours long. Frazier's 1997 novel sprawls across time and geography, and only so much of that fits on a stage.

The duo pared the tale deftly, and what is lost in detail is enhanced by Higdon's colorful score. It is confident, at times indulgent, and it doesn't always connect per-

fectly with the drama. But Higdon finds sounds for all of her characters and makes it their signature; the musical dimensions she adds would feel right to the millions of people who read Frazier's original work.

Music allows the composer to add deeper layers to a piece that traverses the Old South, following Confederate deserter W.P. Inman's long and violent journey home to his love Ada Monroe in North Carolina. Appalachian sounds influence the instrumentation, as do the solemn hymns of the Baptist tradition. Higdon transforms that church music from somber and rote to haunting in sections written for the chorus.

She embraces the full power of the orchestra as a tool for scene-setting, and offers accessible melodies for her singers to exploit, though she resists giving into romanticism. Many of today's new operas rely on big numbers; they can feel like Broadway shows. But Higdon writes mainly to convey dialogue. This piece isn't so much beautiful as it is real.

That gives Scheer a big spotlight. Words matter in "Cold Mountain," and he is alternately sparse and poetic and always on point as his characters suffer greatly from their lost conflict and evolve as humans. They sing:

Some borders can't be crossed,
Some wounds will never heal,
Some things you can't forget,
Hearts buried beneath regret,
In the end, how will I feel?
Who you are the war reveals.

He has a lot of story to impart, and it's a complicated one. The women here are not universally well-drawn, they can be too plucky or virtuous, but as with Frazier's novel, the male characters go deep, conveying within themselves the full scope of human potential and depravity. It's hard to discern the bad guys from the badder guys in this narrative. The ones you end up rooting for are cowards, killers and thieves. Scheer and Higdon mine their dramatic riches without whitewashing their evils.

Robert Brill's scenery allows anything to happen. There is just one set, consisting of a pile of giant beams and boards that jut out in all directions. They evoke, generally, ruin. But the parts move with agility, allowing the heap to stand in as a farm, a boat, a battlefield. The set propels the piece forward as dates and locations are projected on a large timber, making the action easier to follow as time moves backward and forward tracking Inman and Ada's travails.

Director Leonard Foglia has his performers step precariously over all of it and it doesn't look easy, though he guides them into singing that way. Gunn led the pack at the premiere — he's just right for Inman, handsome and tragic and a natural actor. As Ada, Isabel Leonard sang with ample clarity and moved efficiently between the naivete her character starts with and the wisdom she gains the hard way. There was considerable support from Jay Hunter Morris, Emily Fons and Deborah Nansteel in key roles.

As with all operas staged for the first time, "Cold Mountain" has some rough edges. At times, the lighting was so dark you couldn't tell what was going on. The final scene, a flash forward in time, came off as excessive punctuation, a too-good turn meant to send the audience out without so much regret over the demise of the protagonist.

It's unnecessary. Higdon and Scheer have already done their jobs well by then. The real reward comes from experiencing the palpable pain the characters suffer to tell a compelling story and take us to the reaches of human endurance. This is opera; happy endings are not the point.

It's all about life, love and death. And on "Cold Mountain," death especially.